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Why Should I Work Hard, My Teacher Doesn't Like Me: Educational Experiences of Impoverished Students

Abstract

Relationships and communication are two key factors that impact learning. The values and beliefs for some white, middle class, female, teachers contradict these factors with students of color, even greater for impoverished students. Included are strategies, students' voices, and recommendations for effective relational and communicative techniques between these two groups.

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Among today's educators and researchers, prevailing teachers' racial attitudes and beliefs about diverse students are compelling reasons to prepare them for critical diversity (Garmon, 1996). A 1989 survey by the *Association for Teacher Education* revealed that the third highest rated critical issue facing teacher education is preparing teacher for diverse students populations. A critical issue in teacher education today is the mismatch between White majority teachers and their students from diverse economic backgrounds. Nevertheless, disadvantaged students face obstacles that are great. Through habits of neglect, lack of information, apathy and often discrimination, children of color and/or poverty are left behind in schools throughout the country.

Students from poverty are born into a different reality than middle-class children. The focus of life is on subsistence issues: Where will we sleep tonight? What will we eat? Can we find a way to keep our heat or lights on? People born into a middle-class reality tend to focus on selfdevelopment: What is the best education possible? What extra-curricular activities will enhance their full potential? What is the best health care plan? What is the best neighborhood? The context in which children are born and grow up shapes their view of what is possible, their values, and their world-view.

Yet, given the fact that 90 percent of the teaching force is White, working with diverse students (Williams, 2004), the research suggests that most White, middle class teachers harbor racialized and negative attitudes toward students from diverse backgrounds (Ukpokodu, 2004). The stakes are very high for diverse students who are already experiencing dismal academic achievement. What can we do as educators? Educators can develop cultural sensitivity and competence through building relationships and expanding effective communication skills. Comer (1995) stated "no significant learning takes place without a significant relationships"(p. 2). Relationships with students of poverty are a motivator for success achieved in the classroom. White middle class teachers are often trapped in patterns they may not see resulting in student negative behaviors that coincide with the predispositions of environmental risk factors. Many students enter school embarking on several significant questions. "Will my teachers like me? Will they care about me?" "Will I be able to do the work here? Or, "Will I be smart enough?"

Ruby Payne (1998, 2001, 2003) suggests the key to achievement for student from poverty is creating relationships. Relationships are the foundation of a good personalized school (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Using the notion of an emotional bank account: how do students feel about their teachers? How does a formal institution create relationships? How does a formal institution communicate the importance of creating relationships?

Effective communication with parents and students of poverty is critical in the in the educational environment. Too often, teachers, administrators and school board members explain the failures of public education by blaming the students. Today, we have a better understanding of the problems associated with poverty and two decades of research documenting that school can effectively overcome the challenges. The appropriate use of verbal and non-verbal cues and communicating mutual respect will enhance the educational environment for all stakeholders involved.

This presentation will discuss factors impacting school climate between White, middle class, female, teachers and disadvantaged students. Included in this discussion are the voices, past and present experiences of Asian, African-Americans, Hispanics and White students, their experiences as students of poverty attending public school and predominantly White institutions. Guiding practices for creating relationships and effective communication in the educational environment will be identified.

Presenter

Katherine Sprott currently serves as the Coordinator of Professional Development at the Midwest Equity Assistance, Kansas State University with an emphasis in staff development. She is also a doctoral student in the area of Curriculum and Instruction. Previous experiences include teaching at the elementary and secondary levels, an elementary principal, and served as staff development coordinator in Louisiana, Texas and Kansas. Katherine's 24 years of service has been dedicated to educating students and teachers of diverse backgrounds.